Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
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Saskatchewan

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Log Number: 07-22-99
Week of May 28, 2007

MERGER TO HELP BUILD PROVINCE'S PULSE EXPORTS

Two Regina-based pulse crop processing companies, Saskcan Pulse Trading and Agtech Income Fund, have merged with the goal of becoming North America's largest exporter of peas and lentils to the food and ingredient market.

"The merger will benefit the province of Saskatchewan in several ways," said Murad Al-Katib, President and CEO of Saskcan Pulse Trading.

"Ultimately, the pulse export industry is about market reach, financial strength and risk management. This merger brings together two successful companies with strong track records, and completes the product mix we are able to offer global clients, who, in turn, are able to offer better prices to the producers here in Saskatchewan."

Al-Katib says the two companies are a good fit. Saskcan has been around for six years and has seen significant growth in a very short period of time.

"The company essentially started with nothing and has grown to include three plants. It has become one of the largest pea and lentil exporters in the world," he stated.

"When the opportunity came up to look at doing a share offering or a public equity placement, we were looking at options to accomplish that. Merging with Agtech Income Fund provided the solution. They are a profitable, publicly traded company."

Al-Katib says discussions towards the merger began a couple of months ago. Since then, all of the pieces have fallen into place, resulting in the agreement.

"We believe strongly in consolidating the pulse industry," he said. "We also believe that there are too many exporters that are under-capitalized and in a position where buyers in the world market are able to take advantage of them."

By continuing to merge with strong players in the pulse industry, Al-Katib says his company will be able to assist Saskatchewan producers by achieving greater market influence at home and abroad, which will ultimately deliver better prices to growers.

(more)

Currently, Saskcan takes part in a variety of activities, including splitting and adding value to peas and lentils, as well as colour-sorting green lentils. The company is looking at adding chickpeas as well as pulse flour and fibre production to the list, with its main focus being to break into the food and ingredient market.

Al-Katib says the entire motivation behind the merger and the public share offering is to fund the company's growth. "We have plans to continue our development in the food sector," he explained. "We are also looking at other crops that can be processed into food ingredients. These options will allow us to continue down the same path."

The next steps for the newly formed company include getting the private placement of equity closed by June 30, completing a facility expansion in North Dakota, and putting a corporate structure in place to run its five plants, increase rates and continue to bring value-added opportunities to producers of pulse crops and consumers around the world.

"We have estimated it will take roughly a year to bring the structure together. Then, for 2008 and beyond, we will be looking at growth plans," he said.

Al-Katib feels the pea and lentil market in Saskatchewan holds tremendous opportunity. "Now, more than ever before, there is a brighter picture. The prices are up and markets are becoming more quality-conscious, which is an opportunity to extract a premium for value-added products," he said.

"We think that the time is right for Canada to continue on the path of becoming the world's dominant supplier and exporter. To some extent, we are today, but we want to get higher up the value chain. The future is bright!"

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APPLICATIONS NOW OPEN FOR TD 4-H AGRICULTURE SCHOLARSHIPS

Some Saskatchewan 4-H members could find themselves with a bit more cash in their pockets to kick-start their post-secondary educations.

TD Bank Financial Group and the Canadian 4-H Council recently announced that applications for the 2007 TD 4-H Agriculture Scholarships are now being accepted.

The scholarship program provides endowments of $2,000 to 10 students across the country who plan to attend a Canadian college or university for agriculture-related or agri-business studies.

In order to qualify, students must be active 4-H members at least 16 years of age in their final year of high school.

"It's an excellent opportunity for our 4-H members in Saskatchewan, being that TD is offering scholarships to help further their educations in agriculture-related or agri-business studies," said Allison Porter, Provincial Program Specialist with the Saskatchewan 4-H Council.

Porter says that 2007 is the seventh year that TD Bank Financial Group has been funding the scholarships, although the company has been supporting the 4-H movement for 52 years now.

"We know that 4-H members make significant contributions to agriculture in this country, and we are very pleased to give these students assistance in reaching their academic goals," said Matthew Holden, the Manager of Agriculture Credit Products with TD Canada Trust.

Porter says this kind of acknowledgement of her organization's work is much appreciated. "It's important that a business like TD recognize the value in the 4-H program, that they're investing in our youth and assisting our future leaders to further their educations," she stated.

The scholarships are allocated along five geographic regions across Canada, with at least one student from each region receiving an award.

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Saskatchewan falls into the Western Canada region, which includes the three prairie provinces, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut. But the province has boasted multiple winners in some years. Porter noted that Saskatchewan 4-H members received three of the 10 scholarships offered in 2006.

Interested 4-H members are required to fill out an application form and submit it to the Canadian 4-H Council. Information and application packages are available online at www.4-h-canada.ca, or by calling the organization's national headquarters at (613) 234-4448, extension 26.

The deadline for 2007 applications is October 4. The recipients will be announced in November.

The Canadian 4-H Council is a not-for-profit agency that co-ordinates all national 4-H activities in Canada. Founded in 1933, the council offers conferences, exchanges, scholarships and international travel opportunities to 4-H members and leaders across the country.

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ANTHRAX THREAT STILL A REALITY IN SASKATCHEWAN

With four new cases reported so far this year, Saskatchewan producers are not out of the woods yet when it comes to the threat of anthrax.

The reports came from two regions of the province. Three cases were found in the northeast/east-central grain belt, and the fourth was located in the southwest corner of the province in the Shaunavon area.

The recorded cases began in February and continued into mid-March. They were associated with feed that was contaminated by soil containing anthrax spores.

"This process was slightly different than the norm with regard to how the animals most frequently become affected," said Dr. Sandra Stephens, a Veterinary Program Specialist with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA).

"It's still important that producers vaccinate their livestock to protect against anthrax contamination," she stated. "Since the anthrax spore is resistant to any environmental breakdown, it will remain viable in the environment for decades. We are not certain exactly how many years these spores will survive in the environment; however, estimates show that the range of survival includes anywhere between 50 to 200 years."

Producers are advised to talk to their local veterinarians in order to get the vaccine required to prevent contamination.

The cost of the vaccine will be set by the practitioner, usually anywhere from $2 to $2.25 per dose.

The appropriate time for producers to vaccinate their cattle is just prior to the animals being put onto pasture in the spring. The product insert indicates that immunity should last between six and 12 months. The range exists due to variations in individual animals.

"We assume there are a certain number of spores that an animal will be able to consume without causing death," Stephens said. "There are various estimates pertaining to the exact number of spores needed to make an animal sick. It would take approximately 500 or 700 spores, up to a couple thousand."

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To put this estimate into perspective, it is important to note that one gram of soil can potentially contain enough anthrax spores to make several animals sick.

"People often have the vision that the spores are spread nice and evenly around the prairies. However, that isn't the case. They are in clumps," Stephens explained.

"Spores will be found where an animal had died in the past, or where a scavenger had dragged a piece of meat that it had ripped off a carcass, perhaps a hundred meters away. This will leave pockets of spores in the soil."

In the summer, most situations will involve an animal picking up the anthrax from the soil itself.

Animals die very quickly, so it is unusual for producers to observe cattle that are sick before they expire. Symptoms caused by anthrax poisoning include very high temperatures, bloody discharge from the nose and/or mouth, as well as weakness. Stephens says that once the animal starts showing clinical signs, they will often be dead in about two to four hours.

Anthrax is a reportable disease in Canada. "Producers are required by law to report any suspicion of anthrax," she noted. "When producers come across sudden mortalities on pastures, they should rule out what the causes may have been. It is to their benefit to take the proper steps to dispose of the carcass, since it will be their animals grazing in that pasture in the future."

Stephens indicates that producers should either contact their local veterinarian or the nearest CFIA office in order to report a suspected case of anthrax.

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GROWING FOR THE FUTURE THE FOCUS OF UPCOMING CONFERENCE

Plant specialists from across Canada and beyond will converge on Saskatoon for the Plant Canada 2007 conference, "Growing for the Future," June 10 to 14 at TCU Place.

The conference will be a multidisciplinary meeting covering the latest research in botany, plant physiology, plant pathology, horticultural science, agronomy and weed science.

"Plant Canada was initiated in 2001 as an umbrella organization so that different plant-related associations and disciplines could get together, exchange information and broaden their knowledge, scope and contacts," said Dr. Karen Bailey, a plant pathology research scientist with Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada.

Although plant specialists have their own separate groups, meetings and areas of specialization, Bailey says there are a lot of common interests and linkages that can be found throughout the field.

"So Plant Canada, and this conference in particular, enables us to develop some synergies working together on common issues," she noted. "Sometimes, you'll end up with new collaborations or new research ideas that stem from these discussions."

Plant Canada's national conferences are held every two years. The last one was in Edmonton in 2005, while the 2009 meeting will be in Halifax.

This year's conference features two main plenary sessions, one on natural products and a second on developing a Canadian plant health network. "We have some very prominent international speakers coming to talk about these issues, so it should be a very interesting and informative discussion," Bailey stated.

In addition, the organizations comprising Plant Canada have each been asked to organize two "mini-symposia" in areas that relate to the larger plenary sessions. As a result, Bailey says other workshops will be held on topics such as using natural products in horticulture.

An industry session will feature a number of speakers talking about different plant products, how value has been added to them, and where research is taking this field in the future.

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Bailey says the program also includes sessions for contributed papers, as well as student paper and poster competitions. "We've encouraged graduate students to make presentations on some of their work, which is always exciting to hear about."

On top of these discussions, tours are planned that will showcase the synchrotron and other leading-edge research facilities at the University of Saskatchewan, as well as some of the actual field test plots that are being used for various studies.

The conference will include a great deal of discussion in areas of agricultural interest. The industry session, entitled "Designing a New Agri-Food Industry," is one Bailey particularly highlighted.

"We'll be looking at things like trends and opportunities in agriculture, research in areas such as biofuels, innovative products that are being made from grain, and a lot more," she said.

In addition, Bailey noted that lectures on the development of bioherbicides and biopesticides as an alternative to chemicals, dealing with swine manure and compost, working with different types of soil, and nitrogen recycling concepts are all areas that hold considerable interest for the farming community.

As a result, she says the conference will be as relevant to agricultural producers and people who enjoy working with plants as it will be to academics, scientists and those who do research in the field.

Registrations are available for single days or for the full four-day program. Organizers expect to attract around 300 people from all across Canada, the United States and overseas.

For more program details and registration information for the 2007 Plant Canada conference, visit www.plantcanada.ca/2007 or call conference manager Debbie Apfeld at (403) 932-3893.

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CANARYSEED COMMISSION ORGANIZING PLOT TOUR

A research plot tour scheduled for July 18 is the latest project undertaken by Saskatchewan's new canaryseed commission.

The commission was formed last year with a vision of improving canaryseed profitability through increased market diversity and crop innovation. Its primary objectives are to co-ordinate research and expand markets for canaryseed for the benefit of producers and other stakeholders.

Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food special crops agronomist Ray McVicar says the tour at the Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada research farm at Indian Head will showcase some of the results of research on canaryseed innovations so far.

"We'll see research plots showing the agronomy of canaryseed and other crops including millet and niger seed," McVicar said. "There will be research on canaryseed fertility, based on a new study to compare sources of chloride for its ability to improve or stabilize yields."

The Canaryseed Development Commission of Saskatchewan is funded by a refundable check-off of $1.75 per net tonne on canaryseed sales. The check-off will allow growers to have more control over how the crop is developed.

In 2006, there were about 285,000 acres seeded to canaryseed in the province. Total production was over 112,000 tonnes. This qualifies Saskatchewan as by far the dominant producer in the world. The crop is valued at over $43 million per year.

One of the projects the commission has undertaken is an examination of potential new uses for canaryseed, based on its nutritional properties. A technical team recommended that further investigation be done into the possible use of canaryseed for topping replacement for baked goods, blending flour for cookies, roasted whole seed, nutrient bars and high-value supplements for hog food. If research points to the expansion of canaryseed products for human consumption, clearance would be required from Health Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

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McVicar encourages all interested producers to come out to the research plot tour.

"The Crop Development Centre at the University of Saskatchewan has the only canaryseed breeding program in North America, and one of their sites with potential new lines of canaryseed and millet is located at Indian Head. So the tour will be an opportunity to check out some of these cultivars," he said.

McVicar notes that Indian Head is also the site of the Zero-Till Field Day, so there will be an opportunity to view these plots, as well.

The canaryseed tour is scheduled from 1:15 to 4:00 p.m. on July 18. Those attending are asked to assemble at the Pavilion Building on the Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada research farm, located just east of Indian Head. There is no charge for the tour.

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